Communication is the Key

Federal, state and private employees in different parts of the country work together to achieve consolidated, modern facilities at Rome Research Site.

by Wade W. Brower
HQ AFMC

When Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, NY, closed in 1995, the closure decision stated that the Rome Research Site (formerly known as Rome Laboratory) would remain in place at the new Griffiss Business and Technology Park — sparing the local community the loss of many high-paying, technical positions. However, several of the Lab's research facilities were in World War II era buildings that were expensive to maintain and not centrally located.

The Air Force initially planned a project estimated at $12 million that would renovate an older warehouse in the center of campus. However, with the help and cooperation of U.S. Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, the Griffiss Local Development Corporation (GLDC) and the New York State Department of Economic Development, matching New York State funds were provided, making it possible to demolish the old warehouse and build a completely new facility.

The new facility, which will be completely owned and built by the Air Force, allows consolidation and collocation of personnel and functional workloads from 15 buildings to five. Overall, the modernization plan reduces square footage by 27 percent, while cutting the Air Force's operational costs by more than 15 percent. From New York State's perspective, it provides a main focus and theme for the new business park.

"This project," said Rep. Boehlert during the Nov. 1, 2000, groundbreaking ceremony, "reflects years of work and enormous cooperation to forge the federal/state partnership that brings us to this historic moment."

A Demolition Dilemma

Headquarters Air Force Materiel Command Civil Engineering (AFMC/CE) developed the "Add to and Alter the Intelligence and Reconnaissance Laboratory" project, using Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Atlantic Division, as construction agent. The new facility was a fiscal year 2000 design-build project with a total cost of $24.8 million, including demolition and removal of the old warehouse.

MCC Construction Company was awarded the demolition portion of the project in September 2000. Unfortunately, the demolition schedule started slipping immediately when Upstate New York began receiving unusually heavy snowfall for that time of year. The first portion of the demolition, removal of asbestos-containing roof tiles, was delayed while the contractor shoveled 3 feet of snow and ice from the roof.

Next, there was more than 190,000 square feet of 4-foot-thick concrete slab to demolish and remove from the site. Among the unforeseen conditions encountered in the long concrete slabs were unusually heavy steel reinforcement and asbestos-coated steam pipes, which severely delayed the project. What started out as a 90-day demolition project was finally completed almost one year later.

"This facility was built in the 1940s," said Nathaniel Price, Atlantic Division engineering technician/project manager for the demolition. "The concrete and structural items used in those days — you can't find those any more. Also, from the way it was constructed and the workmanship that went into it, it was very obvious when they built these old warehouses, even though they were just warehouses, that they were proud of their work. It took a while to take that old building apart. But you could also tell from the water damage and rust in certain spots that it was time to take it down."

While the old warehouse was being demolished, Atlantic Division progressed with the selection process for the construction portion of the project. However, they could not proceed with the award until funds were transferred to their control. The potential showstopper — the Air Force had to accept the $12 million gift from New York State. A team of AFMC/CE, Atlantic Division, New York State and Rome Research Site personnel resolved this by establishing an interest-earning escrow account and a Memorandum of Agreement with all parties. With this problem solved, all attention turned toward award and eventual design.

Before construction could begin on the new facility, more than 190,000 square feet of 4-foot-thick concrete slab had to be demolished and removed from the site. *(Photos courtesy HQ AFMC)*

A Flexible Design

Due to the nature of Rome Research Site's workload, the branch and division office areas are always expanding or contracting, depending upon current mission requirements. This ever-changing workload meant the facility should be as flexible as possible, yet maintain the rigid infrastructure required for a research facility. The design-build portion of the project was awarded to Atkins Benham Constructors of Oklahoma City in September 2001. The award was based on Benham providing the best overall value for the government.

"The Atkins Benham proposal was the best answer to the question of how the design would respond to the overall program," said Ellen Fiorentino, Rome Research Site project architect and member of the evaluation team. "Their flexible design solution created an opportunity for interaction with all the different programs. We especially liked their creative use of 'attractor spaces' where people could gather and discuss projects."

This flexibility is especially evident in the Main Street area — an open lobby area with 20-foot-high ceilings, a technical library and cafeteria-style seating spaces — where the new facility will attach to the existing Building 3. "The Main Street solution was exactly what we were looking for," said Fiorentino. "People from the new facility and Building 3 will be able to meet, have informal and formal conferences, greet dignitaries and access the technical library without having to go outdoors."

A new "High Tech Auditorium," also located on Main Street, is a focal point of the design. This auditorium is a state-of-the-art presentation space that will showcase Rome Research Site's innovations.

Adding to design complications, Rome Research Site is no longer on a secured base. After the events of Sept. 11, force protection requirements and personnel safety were a major concern. The Atlantic Division, Rome Fire Department, Rome Research Site Security Forces and Atkins Benham designers worked together to provide proper setbacks, access routes and operational methods to meet force protection requirements.

Currently, the design is at the 100 percent stage and construction has begun. The project is anticipated to be complete in the summer of 2003.

"We used a great amount of ingenuity and creativity to meet all requirements and stay within the budget allowed," said Bob Ross, Atkins Benham project manager. "We mainly accomplished this by utilizing our value engineering process, which is a normal part of our design-build process. It meant involving local New York subcontractors very early in the proposal preparation process and following up with them as the design progressed."

***Top, opposite page, and above,* are artist renderings of the new Rome Research Site facility.**

Construction crews begin work on the new, consolidated facility. The project will be completed in 2003.

A Team Approach

From an overall view, the greatest difficulty in proceeding with the project has been the multitude of different organizations that have had input. Besides the typical user organizational reviews with Rome Research Site, Atkins Benham and Atlantic Division, the GLDC and New York State are briefed quarterly. New York State has requested and received unofficial inspection authority to review the project and document how their gift was allocated and expensed.

Since Rome Research Site has no base fire department, the group commenting on the fire code aspect of the design is the Hanscom AFB Fire Department near Boston — more than 250 miles away. Additionally, since the facility is on a public road, the Rome City Planning Office was included in the design of the parking driveways and curbs.

While there is a diverse and multitalented group of people involved, the team approach is evident in every phase of the project. Since the team stretches halfway across the country, from Massachusetts to Oklahoma, communication is the key to a successful building.

When the project is completed, we will have shown that a multitude of federal, state and private employees can work together to achieve a common goal. At all times, we keep in mind that this project is for the workers of Rome Research Site, but it may help spur the economic turnaround of the central New York area. And in this small town that has received so much bad news over the last seven years, this is really good news.

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